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ABSTRACT

Huddersfield University Library (England) has undertaken a wide range of evaluative studies of its services and systems, using various data collection techniques such as: user surveys; exit interviews; online and CD-ROM analysis; benchmarking; user groups; staffing and staff development evaluation; suggestion sheets; student project work; group review; services statistics; and focus groups. Focus groups involve people--users or customers possessing similar characteristics such as environment, knowledge, and background--who participate in focused discussions on a specific topic, and thereby provide qualitative data. Unlike the other evaluation methods, focus groups are used to: (1) gain relatively fast reaction to subjects perceived as needing improvement or change; (2) improve communication or an understanding gap between groups such as students and staff or staff and library staff; (3) generate ideas; and (4) provide additional information to combine with other measurement methods. The procedures used at Huddersfield for organizing focus groups and some experiences are discussed. Focus groups provide new and unexpected insights into user perceptions, behavior, and attitudes which are vital if libraries are to successfully manage their resources and environment. When used in the context of other performance evaluation and measurement methods, focus groups can provide a much more detailed insight into how libraries are perceived and used. (SWC)

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The Role of Focus Groups with other Performance Measurement Methods

by Elizabeth Hart

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The Role of Focus Groups with other Performance Measurement Methods

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In Huddersfield University Library we commenced a new programme of performance measurement and service evaluation three years ago. In a continuing climate of constant and unremitting change in UK higher education over the past four years, data collection was urgently required but we had few resources or staff to address the issues. Nonetheless there was a growing need to both interpret what was happening in the library and to anticipate future trends and directions, in addition to meeting external demand for information both from university management and government bodies. What struck me most forcefully was how little we knew about how the library worked and equally how little was generally known about this complex issue. The two main aims of the new programme related to:

Interpretation:	effectiveness:	library objectives
		progress towards goals
		staff motivation and involvement
		internal efficiency of operations
		costs
	impact:	evaluation via users
		perceptions of services / environment
		identification of problem areas
Anticipation:	planning	
	decision-making	
	possible effects of changes	

Other major aims behind initial development of a 'programme' were:

- to satisfy internal and external needs
- to be cost effective
- to have promotional value if possible

The point about cost-effectiveness relates mainly to the stresses and strains on UK academic libraries and the issues of what else might have been achieved with the staff, resources and time involved in comprehensive performance measurement. The promotional issue is a problematic and a risky strategy as there are penalties to be paid in revealing results and performance measures. However it is a strategy which has brought enormous value, not least in that the library is perceived as actively demonstrating its concern and commitment to attaining quality of service and to listening to its users. All the above could be summarised as attempting to achieve maximum benefit from any performance measurement methods used. Although this may sound obvious, it has been quite difficult to achieve. This is because performance measurement does seem to be perceived as separate from other aspects of library work. At worst it is something which *has* to be done for external reasons or something which is attempted when an answer to a particular problem is required. Richard (1992) noted in his article on performance indicators that the most widely quoted reason for interest in this topic was outside pressure and there was almost no internal (library or institutional) pressure independent of government. In quality terms it is clear that it should be seen as an overall philosophy where information from performance measurement or evaluation is routinely integrated into all aspects of library work.

Over the last three years the library has deliberately undertaken a wide range of evaluative studies of its services and systems, combining a whole range of data and information collection methods. These are briefly outlined below:

User surveys: these were carried out every year initially to produce some series data for comparative purposes but are now carried out every two years. The surveys have typically produced 1,000 to 1,200 responses from a survey of 4,000 to 5,000. They concentrate on issues such as frequency of visit; why visits occur, for example, study, loan etc.; evaluation of services, for example the availability of materials.

Exit interviews: these were carried out at the same time as the user surveys to produce comparative data. They attempted to establish why users had visited the library and whether they had been successful in getting whatever they had required. We made

a fairly obvious mistake with the initial exit interviews in that Library Assistants were employed as interviewers (significantly they were extremely keen to participate) which produced 'false' results - users interviewed by them were notably less critical in their comments!

Online and CD-ROM analysis: detailed studies of the use of these systems are undertaken and have produced interesting and sometimes surprising patterns of use which continue to be studied. The evaluations reveal which students are using the various systems and for how long.

Benchmarking: due to personal professional contacts between the two institutions, Huddersfield recently took part in the benchmarking exercise carried out by the Royal Military College, Shrivenham.

User groups / Course and Pathways Boards: feedback from these groups was systematically noted.

Staffing and staff development evaluation: issues such as leave, ill-health, break-times, training and staff development commitments were evaluated and assessed.

Suggestion sheets: these were designed as a generic tool, mainly to field complaints effectively. Individual responses are provided within two working days and in addition questions and answers are displayed on public noticeboards. The displays are often a focus of interest from users. The information collated can range from environmental problems (no toilet paper for example!) to lack of relevant resources in literature collections.

Focus Groups: (this will be covered later in this paper)

Student Project Work: this is encouraged though very carefully vetted and examined before agreement is reached. When we do commit to a project the student treats the library as a client and we provide a small support group of (usually three) staff to oversee progress and ensure objectives are reviewed and met. One example is of a CD-ROM evaluation which examined by questionnaire and observation how students use the various systems and also the perceived benefits they gain from such access. A presentation of the results is due in September to all library staff.

Group review: a recent example focused upon the work of the Information/Enquiry Desk staff Group who were reviewing the use and work of the information desk at the University Library. This generated useful data concerning how the information desk was being used in practice. Previously some information on this topic had been produced via the Exit Interviews though it had not provided sufficient detail for the purposes of the group.

Services statistics: these are retained on a systematic basis mainly via the library's automation system and include numbers of books issued; number of reservations; number of interlibrary loans; number of visits to the library and many others.

Every available piece of information relating to library performance continues to be collated and library staff are given every opportunity to comment and contribute to the whole. This is achieved by encouraging active participation (particularly during the period of surveys and exit interviews) and regular information appearing in the weekly staff news sheet. In addition a small staff group has been established to consider issues relating to methods of data collection. These actions helped all staff at every level to understand and appreciate why such information was important and how it might be used and shows a genuine respect for the large body of staff experience and knowledge.

Analysis, collation and presentation was undertaken and made available to all library staff via linked Excel spreadsheets (and in paper form to anyone else who was interested). Data was displayed at faculty/department/course level and, in a separate set of spreadsheets, at overall library level. Excel is not entirely ideal for the purpose but has the major advantage of being available on the campus network and of most library staff having some expertise in its use. The link facility offered by EXCEL has proved particularly useful. What we have available is a rich collection of data about the library which has been collated over a period of time and, most importantly, is accessible by all library staff in a format they can manipulate themselves.

The methods of data collection listed above have all proved useful in varying ways and have presented broadly similar results which helped considerably in verifying the validity of the information produced. However some issues remain: there was no 'quick response' method which allowed a view on a specific topic to be obtained; some of the 'comment' data was often very useful but extremely difficult to collate and use and, finally, there was a distinct gap between the long-held perceptions of library staff and those coming from the users themselves. The 'comment' information has successfully been collated via a 'conceptual mapping' method which is efficient and deceptively simple but still takes some time to complete. This uses the familiar

six box grid to group comments into broad categories which can then be broken down into subsets using further six box grids - in essence quite similar to the classification process. The issue of differing perceptions is not a new phenomenon and has been reported many times. For example, data from a study at Louisiana State University, reported by Hamaker (1993), 'explodes the myth that we buy books for particular departments'. This study used circulation data and the LC classification and broadly showed only 28% of circulation in a specific subject area was directly from particular departments. (There was one notable exception, Electrical Engineering, which reached 50% of 'their' books). Similar arguments about users' perceptions usually relate to what they want rather than what they need. My personal view is to concentrate upon what they need and manage their expectation to achieve a match between perceptions of need and want. An interesting article in *Fortune magazine* (Martin, 1995), with the eye-catching title 'Ignore your customer' was largely concerned with the marketing of new ideas and concepts but one or two useful points in relation to qualitative user information were made:

- customers can be wildly unimaginative
  An amusing example provided in the article was Clarence 'Bob' Birdseye, father of frozen food, who began to put forward his ideas on the benefits of frozen food in 1922 to universal distrust. At one point he apparently had 1.6 million pounds of unsold frozen fish on his hands. By the 1940s frozen food had become a staple product.
  Similarly a Motorola executive is also quoted as saying, 'Our biggest competitor, by the way, is not IBM or Sony, but the way people currently do things'.
- ignore what your customers say and concentrate on what they do
  To quote another industrial executive from the article: 'We are not after people's statements, we are after their actions!'

One of the other methods we should be attempting to use when examining performance measurement and use of libraries is observation and the video camera. This is certainly something which should be considered for the future and, through my own work as an NVQ Assessor, a method I have been using experimentally recently.

The use of focus groups within our library has gone some way towards answering the difficulties of 'instant response' and also to partially addressing the issue of how users really act and what their perceptions and attitudes are. Focus groups were used in a rather opportunistic fashion as they originated from a decision of the Students Union to create 150 'course representatives'. Exploiting this opportunity to examine specific issues via focus group sessions was relatively straightforward, due to the good liaison between the library and the Students Union.

Our use of focus groups has been influenced by a number of key writers notably Krueger, Morgan and Greenbaum, though the literature itself spans over 40 years. A brief review of two new titles which includes a useful summary of the major literature to date was produced by McQuarrie (1994). A review of the literature shows that much of the research into use of focus groups has been for marketing purposes and only relatively recently has it been taken seriously in social research. It is a particularly appropriate method to use when the goal is to explain how people (or customers or users) regard an experience, idea or event. Focus groups work quite well because they tap into human tendencies. Attitudes and perception of concepts, products or services are developed in part by interaction with other people which is one of the issues *missed* by other performance measurement methods. We assume via questionnaire surveys and face-to-face interviews that individuals really do know how they feel and that they form opinions in isolation. This is rarely true and opinion and view can be altered or amended by argument and discussion - at a conference or within a management team perhaps. This point should also be seen in the context of earlier comments concerning the management of expectation as libraries can have a direct and dramatic influence upon perceptions of users in very simple ways (a library might be light, airy and spacious for example but not necessarily contain particularly good literature collections). Focus groups can only be used effectively to tackle specific issues because the aim is to conduct a focused discussion. The role of the moderator or interviewer is crucial to the whole as is an awareness of group size and dynamics.

> 'The focus group is a special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition and procedures. A focus group is typically composed of seven to ten participants who are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the purpose of the focus group . . . typically a focus group study will consist of a minimum of three focus groups but could involve as many as several dozen groups.' (Krueger, 1994)

Focus groups are usually used:

- to gain relatively fast reaction to subjects perceived as needing improvement or change
- to improve communication or an understanding gap between groups (such as students / staff; staff / library staff etc.)
- to generate ideas
- to provide additional information to combine with other measurement methods.

Focus groups usually display the following characteristics:

- they involve people (users, customers)
- who possess similar characteristics (environment, knowledge, background)
- they provide data (of a qualitative nature)
- they use focused discussions.

During last session seven focus groups met, with seven to twelve attendees on each occasion. Each lasted approximately half-an-hour to an hour (usually over a lunch period) and were audio-recorded (with the advance permission of the group attendees). The value of a ready made group of potential participants who had been gathered together by a 'neutral' body should not be underestimated when assessing the workload involved. The use of this method was based on the opportunity offered by the creation of 'course representatives' by the Students Union.

The procedures used at Huddersfield for organising focus groups over the past academic year (six months in actual time) are as follows:

1. Prepare the environment and the procedures to be used in advance.
   - 'neutral' environment which is comfortable and preferably informal
   - not more than one focus group per day
   - provide sandwiches and drinks (an inducement!)
   - clear objectives (to receive opinion and views on specific topics)
2. Meet all the potential focus group participants together to propose the idea, outline the process involved and gain acceptance and approval.
   - emphasise the validity of the technique
   - explain audio-taping
   - guarantee anonymity
   - offer alternative venues for other issues which attendees might wish to raise (in fact there are a number already in existence, such as user groups, and as a result no alternative venues were requested by attendees)
3. Find a moderator or interviewer (ideally not from amongst the library staff, though in practice this did happen).
4. Produce guidelines for the moderator or interviewer. The moderator should:
   - be familiar with the participants and their environment
   - keep to the topic
   - cover all questions or aspects of a single question (though not necessarily in sequence)
   - have a sense of humour
   - not talk too much!
   - involve all participants and try not to allow single individuals to dominate
   - play devil's advocate if necessary
   - be uncritical (and correct misconceptions only after the session is ended)
   - feel able to pursue worthwhile ideas which arise
   - be aware of limitations (time, environment etc.)
   - use only open questions (this requires careful planning in advance).
5. Provide the topic in advance to the group (usually one or two weeks in advance).
6. Ensure all library staff are informed of what is happening and have the opportunity to comment and review. Library staff ought to be excluded from the group sessions because they tend (not intentionally!) to intimidate participants and dominate the proceedings. Also if library staff are present, a great deal of time may be wasted as they correct the misconceptions of the participants during the session.
7. Ensure the evaluation of the data is very methodical and disciplined. Audio-recordings can be deceptively easy to use but require time for reflection and review.

An example of one of the questions put to the focus groups related to the library 'silent' areas introduced two years previously. In effect all the library is 'silent' except for two areas designated for group study and discussion. This was a difficult issue. Students protested about undue noise but were largely unprepared to take any action themselves; library staff objected to becoming 'police'; silent areas were broadly seen as beneficial and *needed*

and the environment was not perceived as appropriate by academic staff etc. What follows is a summary of the major comments received after focus group discussion: (Note: there was a general lack of awareness amongst any of the groups that all the library was designated silent except for the two areas previously mentioned.)

- 'We need strict silent / discussion areas, clearly delineated'
- 'When library staff are present users tend to be quieter'
- 'I find it difficult to work in silence - it's distracting'
- 'Mobile phones are a nuisance and should be banned'
- 'The signing is unclear and you are not sure which areas are quiet and which not'
- 'There is no need to have all areas silent, why not have small silent areas and the rest for discussion and group work?'
- 'We could access the silent areas with swipecards and then everyone would feel confident that you could not wander in by mistake. I would feel more confident in demanding everyone be silent then'

The overall results of the sessions indicated that students were not as dedicated to the silent study areas as expected but wanted to retain some smaller areas for silent study. There was a strong demand for more discussion and group study areas (not surprising, though we had provided substantially larger areas the year previously). All groups exhibited a notable lack of awareness of exactly where the group study and discussion areas were located. This perception that students wanted silent areas as they were organised in the library was based upon survey and exit interview feedback on this issue obtained in previous years, where students had been asked specific questions concerning silence policy. The focus group discussions had revealed a previously hidden dimension to the issue which came to light during the participative discussion namely: that the library should review the ratio of silent and group study areas and library signing of those areas. As library staff had already spent a considerable amount of time considering how to maintain the silent areas, these results were interesting and useful. This issue is currently under review in the light of these findings.

From all the focus groups conducted to date, one of the most interesting consequences (which was not entirely unexpected) was the effect upon library staff during the audio playback sessions which were open to any library staff wishing to attend. The prominent feature of many of the focus group sessions were the large misconceptions relating to almost all aspects of library organisation: rules and regulations; loan periods; opening hours etc. As a general rule the library staff reaction could be described as 'surprised', and their perceptions of users were dramatically altered in some instances.

Focus groups have produced some interesting information and responses and they have unexpectedly provided a good method of gaining unsolicited information. We regularly receive comments and views from focus group participants who feel new confidence that their views are being considered. Focus groups do seem to be good at identifying problems (particularly of perception), opportunities and ideas that might not otherwise have been considered. As expected they do not provide 'answers' but are valid in providing new and unexpected insights into user perceptions, behaviour and attitudes which are vital if libraries are to successfully manage their resources and environment. When used in the context of other performance evaluation and measurement methods, focus groups can provide a much more detailed insight into how libraries are viewed and used.

Finally, a cautionary note. Focus groups have not proved particularly cheap. The actual monetary outlay was small (sandwiches, drinks, room, audiotapes) but the time conducting and evaluating the sessions was greater than expected, on average three to four hours per session. However this should be compared with large user and exit surveys which have a far greater staff time burden.

We propose to continue the use of focus groups next session with a fresh set of 'course representatives' and to introduce a further method of evaluation by using conceptual mapping techniques, referred to earlier, with the groups to evaluate services. Our hope is that what emerges will be library services evaluated by the group attendees in terms of various criteria of which the most likely will be cost, convenience and availability.

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